



# The Paradox of Carnival

## Citation

Carrasco, David L. 2014. The Paradox of Carnival. Revista 13 (3), 2-6.

## Published Version

<http://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/paradox-carnival>

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:13039112>

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## The Paradox of Carnival

BY DAVID CARRASCO

TO WALK INTO THE “ENCOUNTERS WITH THE Americas” gallery of the Peabody Museum at Harvard is to experience a paradox of time. The floors of the oldest anthropological museum in the United States creak under your feet and there’s a sense that ancient dust hovers in every corner. The towering gray casts of 5th-century A.D. Maya stelae and the 19th-century style glass cases with their ancient and ethnographic objects combine with these sensations to signal to the visitor a very old part of the New World. This impression of a static long ago shifts as flashes of bright color beckon from the far corner of the hall to the large and brilliant Day of the Dead Altar. Mexico’s vibrant festival tradition has come to Harvard in orange and blue walls, climbing jeweled feathered serpents, a grinning *calavera* sprouting ceramic flowers from its head, magenta and green *papel picado*, bread for the dead, marigold flowers, photographs of the beloved deceased (humans and animals) and a miniature performing skeleton band of musicians showing that a carnival of life and death is permanently underway. Looking up at the top beam of this *ofrenda*, the visitor reads the playful Mexican saying “¡El Muerto al Cajón, El Vivo al Fiestón!” The dead go to the casket, the living to a festival!

The Mexican writer Octavio Paz proclaimed that [we] Mexicans “*somos muy fiesteros*,” but it’s been the multi-ethnic Harvard community and its Boston neighbors who have attended a thrilling festival every Day of the Dead/All Souls Day at the Peabody Museum for the last eight years. During the second half of October hundreds of school children visit the exhibit, often leaving private written messages to deceased family members and pets in a basket set aside for these tender and sometimes irreverent offerings. “Boo Dog, you were my first dog

and I will never forget you. I hope you are having fun terrorizing all the cats up there!” And “Tupac and Biggie Smalls-R.I.P.” Plus “*Papa, Pensamos mucho en usted. Su hijo que lo ama mucho*”. Then “Dear Johnny Cash, thanks for speaking out against injustice and helping my Grandfather and I bond.” Topped by “Dear Chris Farley, thanks for being the greatest comedian of all time. You made everyone laugh.”

On the night of November 1, more than 600 people gather, some dressed as *calaveras* with scary painted faces, others as the coquettish, ghoulish *La Catrina*, to view the stunning altars, eat *tamales* and *pan de muertos* and watch the Harvard “Mariachi Veritas” band sing *rancheras* and Mexican love songs. The electricity and joyousness of the evening raises the question, “What is the meaning of this festival at Harvard?”

The magnetic centerpiece of these overcrowded, loud, delightful fiestas has been a second, temporary Day of the Dead altar in the form of a decorated pyramid constructed by Harvard students (working with Peabody Museum curators) in William Fash’s and my class on “Moctezuma’s Mexico: Then and Now.” A few weeks into the semester we introduce our students, the majority non-Latinos, to the traditions of Día de los Muertos, which combine Catholic and Aztec symbols and invite them to choose that year’s theme for the altar. In 2011 they chose 9/11 and constructed an ominous skyline of New York City with the fallen towers. Another year the student altar memorialized immigrant deaths in the U.S.-Mexico desert. This year the class chose the Boston Marathon bombings and death by gun violence to highlight in their memorial. The result was a spectacular four-sided altar with miniature statues of gods, skeletons, saints, fruit baskets,





The hanging cards from the altar were created by David Carrasco's and William Fash's "Moctezuma's Mexico" students (with help from the Harvard Museums of Science & Culture exhibit department). The other altar was created by Peabody Museum staff with help from Concilio Latino and HUMAS (Harvard University Mexican Association of Students).

flowers, candles, divine dogs and photographs of politicians, revolutionaries and musicians gunned down around the world. Above the multi-colored altar was a gently moving mobile of running shoes and colorful tiles decorated with extravagant, humorous, tragic scenes and symbols of death and life. When I asked one participating student for his reaction to the Day of the Dead festival this year he wrote, “As someone with absolutely no Hispanic background, the experience was immersive. The mariachi band, the Catrinas and Catrins, the altar: for a few hours, I was no longer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but transplanted deep into the heart of ethnic Mexico.”

Kevin Sun’s reaction hits on several key themes of many Latin American carnivals and festivals. The magnetism of the music, the meeting with masked characters who flaunt convention, fashion and in this case death, and the construction of a central stage or altar for symbolic actions temporarily rivet human attention onto an alternate world. Most importantly these festivals generate a “carnival spirit” with its potency to transform our experience of time and place thereby “transplanting” us, during these nights of wonder, danger and stunning symbols, into another section of our cos-

mos. Then the paradox appears because many Latin American festivals display a spirit that critiques the upper levels of the social order and provides to *los de abajo* (among the living and dead) the public setting to turn festival into a play of reformist politics and status reversals. The *gritos*, dances, masquerades, excessive drinking, grotesque pantomimes and sexual displays function to expose, in short term but extremely intensive ways, the naked existential condition, suffering, fantasies and hopes of the marginalized, excluded and oppressed.

#### THE POLITICS OF FESTIVALS

Our students often focus on very contemporary issues, but the political meaning of these festivals is shown early in Juan Pedro Viqueira’s reading of popular religious festivals in 18th-century Mexico.

“The festival which was deeply rooted among the inhabitants of New Spain, was also a ritual of inversion of the social and natural order. The complex relationship between life and death in the belief of the indigenous population, castes and poor Mestizos, was made manifest on this day....the night time visit to the cemeteries made by men, women and children of the town, the festivities and drunkenness that took place there, could

inclusive society. Viqueira added, “This fiesta...sought to make manifest the presence of death in the bosom of life...” and also made manifest the presence, powers and dangers of the underclasses who celebrated not in the light but in the darkness, gathered their families not in the church or the plaza but in the village of the dead where utter loneliness rules throughout the year but is turned into a crowd with power for this single night.

These nighttime festivals at cemeteries became too much for the Spanish authorities. In 1766 the Royal Office of Crime closed the cemeteries at the time of *Todos Santos* and banned drinking after 9 p.m.

#### FESTIVALS AS MIRRORS

Maria Julia Goldwasser, in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, claims that studies of Carnival in ancient Rome, Brazil and Trinidad show that “Carnival...revealed a world in which a playful immutability was possible.” Playing with, making fun of and inverting the symbolic and political “powers that be” led Victor Turner, through his work on the social dramas of Mexico, Ireland, Africa and elsewhere to insist that every society needs to oscillate between the firming up of its social structures and their periodic dissolution in ritual processes and theatrical productions. In “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual and Drama?” Turner observes that the crucial stage in this oscillation is a “threshold” or “liminal phase” in which the celebrants enter into “a no man’s-land betwixt-and-between the structural past and the structural future.” This most potent phase in rites of passage is filled with symbols, characters, words, gestures and moods emphasizing anti-structure, ambiguity, ambivalence, hybrids of animal/human, human/god, male/female beings and employs symbols that “represent both birth and death.” Turner’s insights help us see that liminality puts people in a “subjunctive mood” of possibility, hypothesis, fantasy, desire and what-might-become as well as dreams of revolution and liberation.

As the essays in this issue of *ReVista*

## Festivals reveal the vicissitudes and potentialities of human life. They generate a “carnival spirit” with its potency to transform our experience of time and place.

mos. The Day of the Dead festival took this student—an outsider to Latin America—away from Harvard and rooted him in the “heart of ethnic Mexico.”

In my view the underlying purpose of this and other festivals is to reveal the vicissitudes and potentialities of human life and place people in a comprehensive “communitas”—a living community peopled by a diversity of humans, spirits, animals, the dead and gods who interact temporarily on the shared level of the cos-

not have seemed more scandalous and above all, horrifying to the illustrious elite, who sought to expel death from social life.”(Quoted in Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*, University of Texas, 1991, p. 43)

This unleashing of frustrations, deep devotions and passions exposed social repression and injustices. In some festivals, it presented—temporarily—a shared vision of an inverted and more



Day of the Dead Fiesta photos from 2013 illustrate the extensive use of masks and face-painting.

show, Latin American peoples everywhere organized what Turner calls “cultural aesthetic mirrors,” grand and dynamic dramas which are powerful stories people tell to themselves about themselves in collective formats. These “mirrors,” in the forms of festivals, reflect and reveal critical commentary as participants gawk and gesticulate, mask and disrobe themselves and unmask the “emperors” of their world. When the architects of “official stories” and state media cast up their cultural and political slogans of reality, they usually exclude and diminish the fullness and complexity of the individual and society. Carnivals and festivals flash back shocking, ironic, outrageous, sometimes wicked demonstrations that unmask and often undress official hypocrisy and “good” manners as well as the wounds caused by authorities who strive to appear absolute. Yet in another paradox, it was the Spaniards who held the first great carnivals in Latin America, partly to dramatize their own

official, absolute authority of the *conquistador*. The centerpiece of the first great Mexican carnival was at the Plaza of Mexico City in 1538 when it was transformed into a spectacular Roman Circus by the Spaniards.

#### THE SPANISH CARNIVAL OF CONQUEST

A jaw-dropping description by the conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo shows how the plaza was turned into a fabulous series of theatrical stages where riotous hunts, a naval sea battle, lavish processions and actual killings took place in a recreated 1st-century A.D. Roman Empire.

To celebrate the Treaty of Aigues Mortes between the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, the “Lord of Glorious Memory,” and France, the Viceroy of Mexico Don Antonio de Mendoza and Hernán Cortés organized a series of “great festivals and rejoicings” to display the prodigious energies, wealth and excesses of

the conquistadors and the new capital. The entire Mexico City Plaza was transformed into the forest primeval and then the Battle of Rhodes. First they built a noisy forest with “a great variety of trees as natural as though they had grown there...so perfectly arranged that they were worth observing.” Based on Díaz del Castillo’s accounts, this imitation forest was supplied with deer, rabbits, hares, birds, foxes and jackal, young lions and four small tigers, “for the native Mexican Indians are so ingenious in arranging those things that in the whole universe, according to what many saw who have traveled all over the world, there has not been their like.” Into this forest were deposited a “party of savages” with bows, arrows and cudgels, and when the wildlife was released from their cages the savages “ran after them through the wood and came out into the great plaza” where they killed the animals and each other. This raucous, bloody hunt (observed from nearby windows and seating areas



by lavishly dressed Spanish women) was followed by a grand procession on horseback of fifty “cavaliers and negroes and negresses...suckling their negro children...with their King and Queen” all dressed in necklaces of gold and pearls, precious stones and silver ornaments. This calming display of order, elitism and wealth suddenly exploded into a Spanish and African attack on the indigenous “savages” who were conquered.

The following day, the City of Rhodes was built in the plaza with towers, battlements, turrets and entryways through which paraded “one hundred Knights Commanders with their rich embroidered insignia of gold and pearls...on horseback,” followed by a mock sea battle. Soon, a sea battle was staged with four ships with “main and foremasts and mizzens and sails so natural that many persons were astonished to see them go under sail across the plaza” firing cannons into the air. Masquerading the early successes of Christian evangelization as well, this sea battle included “some Indians on board dressed to be like Dominican Friars when they came from Castile” with the added touch that some were “plucking chickens and others fishing.” This noisy masquerade merged into full battle between Christian Knights and two companies of Turks... “most Turklike with rich silk robes all purple and scarlet

and comfits...best wines obtainable, *aloja* (*aloja*, a beverage made of water, honey and spice [mead]), *chuca* [*chicha*, a beverage made from fermented fruits and cacao all frothed up] and *suplicaciones* [a kind of thin, light pastry],” all served on a rich table service of gold and silver. In a gesture of verbal masking, Díaz del Castillo wrote that the jesters and “versifiers” recited praise and jokes about the Spanish authorities and conquistadores. Yet he blotted out the sentence in his manuscript that read “and some of them were drunk and spoke...indecently until they were taken by force and carried out, so as to silence them.”

#### COUNTER-CARNIVALS

Despite the ability of colonial authorities to present overwhelming performances of triumphal domination in the New World, colonized peoples throughout Latin America performed their own “aesthetic mirrors” animated and peopled by indigenous and African myths, gods, spirits, drinking rituals, dance movements, sexuality and the presentation of hybrid costumes and the manipulation of regalia. The immense exuberance of these counter-carnivals was considered scandalous and devilish by ecclesiastical and civil authorities who continually schemed to regain control and suppress what they feared were pre-contact

priests regarded as decorous and reverent conduct.” This drive and ability to rework the Christian rituals, according to their indigenous traditions and trance-producing practices, was combined with immense aesthetic repertoires and resulted in New World festivals that utterly changed European, ancient and local ritual practices into mixed Latin American styles of sensuality and symbolic politics as so many of the articles in this *ReVista* show.

#### CARNAVAL SIN FIN/MAGIC MASKS AT HARVARD

The ethnographic collections at Harvard’s Peabody Museum reflect all this history. They are more of a storehouse of possibilities than just a container of old, classified cultural objects. Cultural revitalization happens there through periodic educational festivals. When Harvard student Harleen Gambhir walked out of the Peabody Museum as midnight approached on a recent Day of the Dead Festival, her face was painted as a dramatic Mexican sugar skull and she learned the paradoxical power of masking. She wrote that during the magical evening when she and friends mimed their roles as spirits of the dead, “We played around with the many ways that you could say a lot without saying anything at all. We floated from child to child, staring mournfully, playfully, or inquisitively, as struck our fancy.” Walking to her dorm in the night through Harvard Yard, she wondered if someone would recognize her, “forcing me back into my daily identity.” No one did recognize her because living temporarily in betwixt life and death, recognition and anonymity, she realized that “the mask of the event was so powerful that the magic never wore off.”

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## Colonized peoples throughout Latin America performed their own “aesthetic mirrors.”

and gold.” This battle is disrupted when “a lot of fierce bulls were let loose so as to separate them.”

As every carnival needs a feast, Díaz del Castillo adds extraordinary details of the “splendid repast” that took place at this first and greatest of New World carnivals. The wives of the conquistadores were finely dressed in crimson, silk and damask with gold and silver jewels and along with other settlers of Mexico were served “marzipan, sweetmeats of citron, almonds

religious sensibilities rooted in Native American and African dreams. William Taylor describes the negotiations by the colonized in 18th-century Mexico when “Indians in central Mexico adopted a whole series of Christian practices that were familiar or readily understandable to them, such as attendance at mass, penitence by flagellation, pilgrimage, liturgical theater, sacred dancing and other forms of worshipful movement, but carried them far beyond what the